

Milton H. Sanford-William King Covell House
72 Washington Street
Newport
Newport County
Rhode Island

HABS No. RI-345

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D. C. 20240

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS No. RI-345

MILTON H. SANFORD - (William King Covell House

Location: 72 Washington Street

Present Owner: William King Covell

Present Occupants: Owner and tenants

Present Use: Apartment residence

Significance: An early work of the Boston architects, Fehmer and Emerson, this house is exceptional for its interior decoration in the Pompeian style. Irregular in shape, the house is excellently adapted for summer living along the shore. The surrounding open porches further establish the relationship to the sea.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Original and subsequent owners:

The building is located in Plat 12, Lot 92. The following is an incomplete chain of title from Newport City Clerk's Records for the city of Newport. Reference is to number and volume of Land Evidence Books, (LEB.--, p.--).

1869 Deed of October 25, 1869, recorded in LEB. 41, pp.65-6.

From: Phebe Goddard
To: Milton H. Sanford of New York
For: \$4500

"...certain parcel of land with all the buildings and improvements thereupon situated in Newport and bounded...Northerly on the Marble Estate so called now belonging to Job B. Wilbour one hundred feet, Easterly on Washington Street fifty feet, Southerly on a passageway or continuation of Willow Street to Narragansett Bay one hundred feet, and Westerly on said bay or the salt water fifty feet... "

1870 Deed of June 3, 1870, recorded in LEB. 41, p.135.

From: Job B. Wilbour, by guardian
To: Milton H. Sanford
For: \$2000

"...certain parcel of land, with all the improvements thereupon, situated on Washington Street, in said Newport and bounded and described as follows. Northerly on land late of William Newton, deceased, 100 feet; Easterly on Washington Street, 50 feet; Southerly on the Thomas Goddard Estate, so called, now belonging to said Sanford, 100 feet; and Westerly on Narragansett Bay, 50 feet...said land may be it having been known of late as the 'Bedford Estate'..."

1870 Deed of June 7, 1870, recorded in LEB. 41, p.136.

From: Amy R. Wilbour (wife of Job B. Wilbour)
To: Milton H. Sanford
For: \$2000 release of dower

1895 Deed of September 12, 1895, recorded in LEB. 68, p.46).

From: Heirs of Milton H. Sanford
To: William K. Covell
For: \$16,600

"...parcel of land with all the buildings and improvements... bounded and described as follows, to wit: Northerly by land late of William Newton deceased; Easterly by Washington Street, one hundred feet; Southerly by a passageway or continuation of Willow Street to Narragansett Bay; and Westerly by said Bay or saltwater, containing about fifteen thousand six hundred and fifty square feet of land, being all the same premises conveyed to Milton H. Sanford..."

Subject however, to the restriction that the name of "Edna Villa" by which the dwelling house situated on the first described parcel of land has been heretofore known, shall not be in any way used hereafter by the grantor or his heirs. "

1940 Deed of December 30, 1940, recorded in LEB. 147, p.276.

From: Devisees of William W. Covell
To: William King Covell
For: The premises are conveyed subject to a mortgage of \$12,000 principal money upon which there is now due the sum of \$11,200 principal money and which said mortgage this grantor hereby assumes and agrees to pay..."

...containing 15,650 sq. ft., being part of the premises conveyed to William King Covell by Samuel F. Barger, et als, by deed dated September 12, 1895...and subsequently devised to these grantors, and this grantee...

2. Date of erection: November, 1869-August, 1870.

3. Architects: Fehmer and Emerson, Boston.
(Carl Fehmer, 1835-? and William Ralph Emerson, 1833-1917).

4. Builders: A. A. Low and Co.
 5. Original plans: None known.
 6. Alteration and additions: There have been no major alterations or additions to the house. The kitchen has been moved up from the basement to permit an apartment. Another small kitchen has been installed on the second floor to permit another apartment.
 7. Important old views:
 - A. Old views: There are early and recent photographs of the house in the Newport Historical Society. The Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities has similar photographs and also a photograph of the stable.
 - B. Descriptions: Description of the house at 72 Washington Street, Newport, Rhode Island: built for Milton H. Sanford in 1869 - 1870. What follows is a transcript from a newspaper article by Margery Deane (Mrs. T. T. Pitman) which was published in the Boston Journal on August 9, 1870 as one of a series of "Newport Letters, 1869-1870": The original is in a scrap book belonging to the Newport Historical Society.
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The most elegantly finished house ever built in Newport is that of Mr. M. H. Sanford, just completed. Though a New Yorker, the work has been done entirely by Boston parties, even to the furnishings of the parlors. Messrs. Fehmer and Emerson are the architects, and A. A. Low & Co. the builders. The location is on the Point and the lawn has a water front and sea wall built at great expense. The house is rather plain on the exterior, of the bar finish, with French roof and wide piazzas on three sides. The interior finish is hardly to be described. Not a particle of paint or shellac is employed in the whole house, and there are to be no carpets used. The floors from top to bottom are laid in hard wood, in fancy patterns, no two rooms alike, and waxed. Oak, ash, cherry, hard pine, maple and black walnut are employed in these, and the floors are grooved, tongued, and glued in a most thorough manner. The woodwork of the parlors is butternut, with ebony trimmings and panels of mottledwood of the root of the butternut tree. These panels all through the house are polished as finely as a piano, the rest of the wood being waxed. The dining room is finished in black walnut, with mottled panels and a carved wainscoting, and is the only room in the house papered. The paper is green and gold, in imitation of leather, and cost \$18 a roll. The furniture of walnut, inlaid with gilt, with coverings of red Russian leather, and the floor is of walnut and oak, in a beautiful pattern. The hall is a novelty, and surpasses any seen in Newport villas. It is 35 feet from floor to ceiling, and a grand staircase, with polished rail and panels, winds around it, each landing having a fancy piece laid in different colored woods. From each story are projecting balconies with bronze gas fixtures, and near the top is a beautiful stained glass window. But the frescoed walls are one of its chief attractions, and the designs and colors are of the most chased and elegant description. It is frescoed in the Pompeian style and done in oil in the best manner, as is the whole house, even to the servants' rooms. Everything is complete, and the billiard and

smoking rooms are perfect little gems. There are very few houses in the country finished as is this, and Boston may well be proud of its handiwork. The house is palatial, and no expense has been spared to make it what the owner desired: perfect. Everything is done in the most thorough manner, and even the inside of the closet doors in the upper story is as beautifully polished and waxed as are those of the parlors. The finest grained wood that could be procured is used in the floors and woodwork, and in the furniture which matches and which is also oiled and waxed in the same manner. In the third story is Kate Field's sanctum, for this is her room. She is the niece of Mrs. Sanford, and lives with her. The room designated for her use overlooks the harbor and bay, and has a bay window, with mirrors on either side reflecting the view and enabling a person lying on the couch built in the window to see everything for miles each way without looking out. The floor is laid in stripes of walnut and ash, with fancy borders and corner and window pieces, and the walls are finely frescoed. The furniture is of the bamboo pattern, and rich Turkish rugs are laid about the room. A graceful arched bridge leads from the lawn to a little pier where lies Mr. Stanford's little yacht and Miss Field's pretty blue boat. The view of the Narragansett (Bay) and the channel leading out into the sound (ocean) is unsurpassed, and the river steamers, New York boats, and all the sailing vessels that enter or leave the harbor must pass before the door.

Evening Post (August 10, 1870) in Margery Dean Newspaper Clippings.
1869-1871. p.76.

Mr. M. H. Sanford, a well-known New Yorker, has just completed the finest house, as far as interior decorations and finish are concerned, ever built in Newport. It is an elegant seaside residence, built in the most thorough and costly manner, and is almost palatial in its appointments. There are many larger and more showy summer homes here, but none more attractive.

The exterior is of the bar finish, with French roof and wide piazzas surrounding it on three sides. It is painted in two shades of gray, with dark brown trimmings, and stands close down by the shore, a flight of solid granite steps leading from the front piazza to the water.

The lot was small, and Mr. Sanford, unable to obtain more land, has built out a sea wall one hundred feet, filled it in, and made a pretty little lawn, surrounded on three sides by the sea. This has been done at enormous expense, but the effect is very beautiful. From this wall a graceful arched bridge, spanning fifty feet, leads to a little pier where, when not in use, lie Mr. Sanford's yacht and Miss Kate Field's pretty blue boat. There are accommodations for bathing also, and a fresh sea breeze is always stirring.

Entering the house by the front door, you step directly into the hall, which extends the length of the house, a double door composed of two immense sheets of plate glass opening from the back end upon the veranda facing the sea. The floor is laid in narrow strips of cherry and black walnut, with an elaborate fancy border of walnut and maple.

And here I would say that no carpets are to be used in the house, every floor being laid in this manner, each room of a different pattern. All kinds of hard wood are employed in them, and they are all grooved, tongued and glued, then polished with wax.

The main hall is eighteen feet square, and is open from floor to ceiling, a distance of thirty-five feet. From each story are projecting balconies, with bronze gas fixtures on the balustrades, which light the hall in a very beautiful manner. The staircase is very grand; is of solid black walnut waxed, with mottled walnut trimmings, polished like the case of a piano.

On each landing are fancy figures of various woods, and the stairs are not to be carpeted. The walls and ceilings like the rest of the house, are beautifully frescoed in oil, and in the fourth story is a handsome stained window.

Each room is finished in some variety of hard wood, the panels and trimmings made of the same kind of tree, but of the root, and highly polished. The parlors are finished in butternut, with ebony and gold moldings and mottled panels. The dining room is of black walnut, and has a carved wainscoting of the most beautiful description. The walls are papered with green and gold paper, in imitation of leather, costing \$18 per roll. With these exceptions, every room in the house, even to the servants', are frescoed in oil. Everything is done in a most thorough manner, the interior of the closet doors being finished with as much care as those of the parlors.

A fine billiard room is on the second floor, and a cosy little smoking room above, stained glass doors opening upon one of the hall balconies.

The thresholds are of black marble; the hinges of the doors bronze, with silver plated trimmings; and the cost of the chandeliers, which are green bronze and silver, with amber globes, would build a comfortable house.

The furniture has been made to order to match the rooms in which it is to be placed, and here again no expense has been spared. Rich Turkish rugs are laid down in the chambers, and will be used largely in the other rooms during the winter. In the fourth story, counting the basement, looking seaward is Kate Field's sanctum; for this is her home. She is a niece of Mrs. Sanford's.

The walls and ceilings are frescoed in two shades of gray, with borders after the Pompeian style. The floor is laid in stripes, with an intricate border of ash, pine and black walnut; and the furniture is oak and ebony, in the bamboo style. Jutting out from one corner is a square bay window containing an upholstered couch, and commanding a magnificent view of the harbor and bay. This window is mirrored on either side, and the view is reflected in such a manner that a person occupying the couch can see in every direction.

Mr. Sanford takes possession next week. The house was begun last fall, with the intention of having it in readiness early in the season, but the work has been done in such a manner that it was impossible to have it completed before.

The location is on the "Point," at the other end of the town from Bellevue avenue. All the steamers and vessels that enter or leave the harbor must pass almost before the very door.

This is one of the most desirable situations in Newport, and is preferable to the greater part of the avenue, as is also the south side of the harbor, where are many beautiful houses."

Sanford-Covell House: Margery Deane Newspaper Clippings, 1869-1871.
p.45. Unknown paper dated May 23, 1870.

"The house of Mr. M. H. Sanford, on the point, is to cost \$50,000, and is being built by Boston men, the Messrs, Low; and the architects are Emerson and Fehmer, also of your city [Boston]. Owing to the late changes in the plans, it will not be ready for occupancy before the middle of July. It was Mr. Sanford's original intention' to build a cottage costing about \$7000, which would amply accomodate his family of two. The fine residences of his neighbors, and the elegance of the other new houses, rather changed his mind; and if I were not mistaken, the place will cost him nearer ten times that sum when furnished and completed."
signed Lamonte

Margery Deane Newspaper Clippings, 1869-1871.
Unknown paper dated August 23, 1870

-- House just completed; designed, built and furnished by Boston parties.

B. Historical Events Connected with the Structure:

According to newspaper accounts Milton H. Sanford intended to erect a more modest summer house, but altered his plans causing a delay in the construction. The southwest room of the third floor was known as Kate Field's room. A niece of Mrs. Sanford, she was a writer and editor of a magazine in the 1880's. The Town and Country Club, a literary group founded in 1870 by Julia Ward Howe meet occassionally in the house during the 1870's.

C. Sources of Information:

1. Primary and unpublished sources:

Records of Deeds in Newport City Hall
Willis, William H., Jr. "Research on Sanford-Covell House,"
Yale University, c. 1964.

2. Secondary and published sources:

Darling, Fayreen A. "The Most Elegant House in Newport,"
Yankee (April, 1967), pp.78-81+.

Downing, Antoinette F. and Scully, Vincent J., Jr.
The Architectural Heritage of Newport, Rhode Island.
2nd ed. New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1967.

Newport Mercury, October 30, 1869.
November 20, 1869
March 26, 1870

Pitman, Mrs. T. T., Margery Deane Newspaper Clippings, 1969-1871.
The following is a list of articles by her in the scrap book about the house.

- p.43: The Evening Mail, May 13, 1870.
- p.45: Unknown paper, May 23, 1870.
- p.49: The Boston Journal, August 9, 1870.
- p.54: Unknown paper, August 23, 1870.
- p.55: The Boston Sunday Herald, March 26, 1870.
- p.71: Evening Post, August 4, 1870.
- p.76: Evening Post, August 10, 1870.

Zaitzevsky, Cynthia. The Architecture of William Ralph Emerson, 1833-1917. Cambridge: Fogg Art Museum, 1969.

3. Likely sources not yet investigated:

The personal and family papers of Milton H. Sanford.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The compact mass of the house is carefully articulated by the clapboard sheathing and rectilinear framing. Topped by a steeply flared roof, the dense mass of the building conceals an open three story stair hall with projecting balconies. Most unusual is the two-dimensional polychrome decoration painted on the plaster walls.
2. Condition of fabric: The house needs repair, but its over-all condition is fair to good.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: About 60 feet by 40 feet; irregular four bays; irregular rectangle; two-and-one-half stories.
2. Foundations: The house has brick foundations.
3. Wall construction: The wood studs of the walls are covered with clapboarding. Flat wood strips articulate the surface and express the skeletal nature of the construction.

4. Structural system: All interior framing is of light wooden members.
5. Chimneys: There are three brick chimneys.
6. Openings:
 - a. Doorways: The two leaf front door has three panels per leaf with deep molding. Although on the east side of the house, the door actually faces south along the porch. Centered on the west facade is a French door, a single sheet of glass per leaf. There is a plain wooden door in the center of the west basement wall.
 - b. Windows: Most windows are double hung with a single light per sash. On the first floor along the south and west porch are five French windows having two panes per leaf with fixed transom lights above. The northwest porch was enclosed about 1915 by storm windows - having eight lights. In the stair tower are two groups of three double hung windows with etched glass. The small dormer window at the third floor level of the stair hall has etched glass with painted yellow fleur-de-lis, a blue edge and a border of abstracted green flower leaves and white buds. The smaller dormer window to the north has colored glass. Most windows had shutters on the exterior. Two window groups have small shingled shed roofs.
7. Roof: The low upper slope and steeply pitched lower portions of the roof are covered with slate shingles laid in decorative patterns. The bottom portion of the roof is flared. The flat top surface of the roof is covered with metal sheathing. Projecting rafter ends carry the gutters. There are eight dormers. The three at the northeast corner have pitched roofs with picturesque detailing in the gable. At the southeast corner a projecting pitched roof with slate shingle covers the small open porch.
8. Porches, stoops and bulkheads: The flat roofed porch has chamfered posts with braces. Beginning at entrance on the east side of the house, the porch wraps around the house to the middle of the north facade. At the northwest corner the open porch becomes glazed. There is a railing along the south and west sides with chamfered balusters and diagonal cross bracing at the posts. Due to the sloping site there is a covered area along the west facade of the house. Due to rotting the lower portion of the porch posts at ground level have been cut off and replaced. There is also a porch at the southwest corner of the third floor above a projecting window bay below.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plan: Entering the house one steps into a three story open stair hall. Turning to left an east-west hall extends to the French windows on the west that open to the porch. On the right is the dining room at the northwest corner and the two parlors to the left are at the southeast and southwest corners. The service area is under and behind the stairs at the northeast corner. The kitchen and servants quarters were in the basement. A dumb waiter is connected to the serving pantry. Between floors and to the north of the second landing is located the billiard room. The second floor had bedrooms in the northwest, southwest and southeast corners.

In the center of the west facade was located the bathroom for family and guests. One of the original marble top wash basins remains in the guest room, the northwest corner bedroom. On the third floor were three more bedrooms above those below. At a slightly lower level was a small room above the billiard room called the smoking room in some descriptions.

2. Stairways: There is only one staircase. Between the first and second floors the open staircase turns 180° with an intermediate flight. From the second floor the plan is repeated, but restricted in its dimensions. The stair to the roof is an ordinary 90° winder. The stairway to the basement is below the main stair. Elaborately carved newels and balusters in an Eastlake manner support a broad shaped handrail.
3. Flooring: Wooden parquet floors of walnut and oak decorate every room of the house. The first floor rooms, stairs and the southwest room have different borders of elaborate designs.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: See descriptions for original conditions. Most ceilings have had oak tongue and groove paneling in a diamond pattern with an overlay of wooden strips marking out large square areas and accenting the chandeliers hanging from the center. The walls of several rooms on the third floor have a similar treatment. On the second floor the southeast and southwest bedrooms have similar ceilings and cove cornices. The ceilings of the hall and parlors have fake beaming and paneling. All this work was done before 1895. The present wooden strips on the third floor plaster ceiling date from about 1920 when the frescoes were painted over. The walls in the northwest guest room were papered and more recently this paper was painted over. The unusual wallpaper in the dining room has been removed.
5. Doorways and doors: The doors into the southwest parlor and dining room are two leaf with paneling to match. The wainscoting was described. Two painted paneled doors in the corner under the stairway have etched glass. These doors conceal the service area and a closet with original powder room. The doorways are of plain surfaced moldings accented by stencil designs around the corners.

6. Special decorative features: The most unique feature of the decoration is the stencil decoration in the stairhall, main hall, dining room, and billiard room. A two leaf window in the balcony of the smoking room which opens into the stair hall has frosted glass with similarly designed abstract flowers in vases. Around the edge of the windows is a geometric border in red. The parts of the flower design are painted red, blue, yellow and green. There remain two wooden fire screens with cut scroll work in the abstracted floral design. One screen is in the third floor southwest bedroom fireplace. The second is used as a cabinet door in the bathroom to the northwest bedroom on the second floor. A large framed mirror has been installed to the west of the entrance door. Ten pieces of furniture and a bust of Milton H. Sanford remain in the house.
7. Hardware: Much of the original hardware remains. The doors have various designs of glass, porcelain, and brass knobs. There are speaking tubes in several main rooms. In the bathroom on the second floor was a water tank to create pressure for the first and second floor facilities. The water was collected on the roof and stored in the basement cistern and pumped up to the tank on the second floor. With the introduction of city water the system was no longer used. A bathroom was installed on the third floor.
8. Lighting: The gas chandelier in the dining room has never been completely converted or removed. Etched glass globes decorate the converted fixtures on the staircase.
9. Heating: Originally the hot air system reached only a few rooms on the first and second floors. When the Covells lived in the year around the heating system was supplemented by hot water radiators.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The house is located in a residential area which has been declared a historic district. Entered on the east side, the house faces Narragansett Bay to the west. The lot sloped down toward the bay.
2. Historic landscape design: The original pier was destroyed by the hurricanes. Little or nothing remains of the original landscaping.
3. Outbuildings: The stable, located on Willow Street, was converted into apartments in about 1930 by William Covell. In the 1930s the building was moved by Mrs. Covell to the north end of Washington Street. It still stands on this site.
4. Walks: A curving walk of granite leads from the middle of the south porch to the lower level of the lot.

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

Newport HABS Project -- 1969. Sponsored in cooperation with the Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission, Antoinette F. Downing, Chairman. Under the direction of James C. Massey, Chief of HABS, and Osmund Overby (University of Missouri), Project Supervisor, Jack E. Boucher, photographer.